DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 025 780 CG 002 202

By-Barrick, Marilyn C.; Creveling, Patricia

Similarities and Differences of Marathon and Ongoing Strength Groups.

American Personnel and Guidance Association, Washington, D.C.

Pub Date 8 Apr 68

Note-14p.; Paper presented at the American Personnel and Guidance Association Convention, Detroit, Michigan, April 7-11, 1968.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.80

Descriptors-*Experimental Groups, Group Behavior, Group Dynamics, *Group Experience, Individual Development, Interpersonal Relationship, *Self Actualization, *Self Evaluation, *Sensitivity Training

Marathon groups offer individuals an opportunity to engage in intensified, authentic personal encounter with each other in a small group setting, usually with 10-15 persons in a group. This is a report of tentative findings at the Student Life Center, University of Colorado. There were three matched groups, each with nine sophomores. The first (on-going) group met one and one-half hours each week for eight weeks. The second group met 12 hours over a weekend (marathon group). The third group served as a control. The two co-leaders functioned in both encounter groups. Both groups went through similar dynamic phases, and were characterized by honest and satisfying patterns of relating, self-exploration, and self-disclosure. The marathon group was felt by members to be the more rewarding experience. Data (reflected by a measure of increased feeling of internal control over the pattern of one's reinforcements) suggest that on-going group members became slightly more internalizing, while the marathon group became somewhat less internalizing. Future research, using the marathon in a variety of ways, will build in questions dealing with the individual within the dynamic interpersonal encounter. (KP)

ED025780

# SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF MARATHON AND ONGOING STRENGTH GROUPS

Marilyn C. Barrick, Ph.D.
Patricia Creveling, M.A.

Paper presented to American Personnel and Guidance Assoc., as part of a symposium on Marathon Counseling in the University Setting, Detroit, Michigan, April 8, 1968.

Perhaps one of the most exciting aspects of group work today is the fact that much of it is still very much in the stage of exploration. Every time I join a discussion about human interaction experiences, I learn something new, get caught up with an idea for an innovation, or am off and running with a new hypothesis as to what it is that is actually happening. George Bach, one of the originators of the marathon group, has put it well, "our culture has become acutely 'group-conscious!'. As the humanistically oriented sections of the American people, especially the younger generation, are searching for antidotes to societal alienation, they have become more receptive to and supportive of the various new forms of therapy-group life which have emerged on the psychological scene" (Bach, 1967).

Furthermore, although the entire area of group work has a sense of excitement and change pervading, marathon groups are being viewed with particular interest -- and, I might add, with a fair amount of ambivalence by many interested professional people. I have heard three or four questions raised over and over again about the marathon experiences, and I would like to respond to these points, briefly, before presenting some of our work in the area.

First, one frequently hears the question, "What are marathon groups, anyway?" In answer, marathon experiences are an opportunity for individuals to engage in intensified, authentic, personal encounter with each other in a small group setting, usually including ten to fifteen persons in a group. Groups meet for an extended period of time, frequently over a weekend, for anywhere from twelve

CG 002 202

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

to thirty hours. For an excellent description of the details of the marathon group, see Elizabeth Mintz's (Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 1967) presentation on the subject. Such groups, by the very nature of the contract of openness and spontaneity among members, have the ingredients for self-exploration and growth within an interpersonal relationship context. Frederick Stoller, another of the originators of the marathon, clarifies the place of such experiences. "A powerful group experience permits the individual to explore his own resources, those of the people with whom he finds himself, and those of the world around him. Group experiments provide experiences, not intellectual exercises -- and experiences have the power to reshape us." (Stoller, 1967). He goes on to make a point which seems most relevant to this particular meeting. He states that just as a student is not stupid because he goes to college to learn, so a person is not sick because he seeks encounter experience to help him grow. Thus, the marathon group is seen as a positive growth opportunity, rather than a pathology oriented treatment effort.

A second question raised is, "What do we know of what actually occurs in people who take part in such experiences, and, if it is true that knowledge is still very limited, aren't you taking tremendous risks with the people involved?" Now that is a question and a half -- but important to raise and to get a response. Actually we still do know very little of what occurs in people who take part in such experiences, at least if we rely upon the usual objective, statistical measures of change. Carl Rogers has made an interesting statement which is to the point here: He says, "the closer one gets to trying to assess the intangible things which probably are most important in personality change, the less are customary instruments being used, and the more suspect are the only instruments that seem to me to make any sense. I think that in those intangibles, the only person who can help us out is the person to whom something

has happened. We need to get more pictures of what it seems like to the person inside, who has experienced the change." (Rogers, 1967). Controlled research is just beginning in the field of marathon work, and it is evident that appropriate measures which are sensitive to the variables operating in the marathon situation are still in need of development and refinement. If we look at measures of interpersonal interaction and allow subjective reports of participants into our realm of observation and analysis, the picture may become somewhat less cloudy. As to the second part of the question raised, the amount of risk involved in our current state of relative ignorance, we can respond that it is, of course, important to minimize such risks as much as possible. One can do so by making very clear the terms of the personal contract when one enters a marathon group, by emphasizing individual responsibility for feelings and actions in the group, and by continual critique and improvement of leader responsibility and techniques.

A final question which I would like to consider is the one which goes, "With all this lack of knowledge, are you simply jumping in with all four feet because the intensity and human drama of the marathon is inviting?" In a sense, the answer is, "yes", we are jumping in -- in response to the increasing demand on the part of people, in general, and students, in particular, for humanistic experiences which will somehow reach out to the sensitive, caring, feeling aspects of the person. In an interview for the Los Angeles Times last year, Carl Rogers commented on this situation by saying, "it is a fascinating fact that with almost no support from universities, little recognition from academic people and no support from government grants, 'basic encounter' groups have become the most rapidly growing psychological trend in our culture" (Hoover, 1967). Rollo May, from his position of existential psychiatry, has amplified the position of humanistic need when he has emphasized that there comes a

point -- and that this is a critical challenge in our times, when we must recognize that the cult of technology seems to be destroying feeling and blotting out personal identity (May, 1967). Marathon groups may be seen as one potential way back to an emphasis upon feelings and the sense of personal identity of the individual. It is certainly true that persons who have been involved in marathon or other intense group experiences express subjectively, a sense of relief from loneliness, isolation, emptiness and sterility -- at least during the period of the marathon experience. One of the efforts which is essential, however, is that of following people who have participated in such groups to see whether or not subjective experiences during and shortly after the marathon are integrated into a person's future functioning.

Having responded to some of the usual questions about marathon groups, I would now like to report to you some of the findings, still very tentative, which we have abstracted from groups which were run last year at the Student Life Center, University of Colorado. Much of this work has been jointly with Miss Patricia Creveling, who is now Assistant Dean of Students for the Erie campus of Penn. State University, and without whose efforts the work would not have been accomplished. I would like to describe one attempt to study the marathon groups under a matched groups research design. This project was completed last year, and while our findings are in no way conclusive, we feel that we have learned about the marathon experience, about group efforts with college students, and something of their impact upon those students.

Our groups were called "strength groups," referring to our emphasis upon the actualizing of the positive potential of the participants involved. For much of our thinking, we are indebted to Herbert Otto's conceptualizations, as well as to those of Abraham Maslow, Ted Landsman and Carl Rogers. Otto has

essentially reversed the pathology-seeking emphasis of traditional group therapy and has become interested in creating interpersonal conditions under which the capacity to reorder life, to discover new values, to develop inner resources, to find new ways to live and to be, can take place. We emphasized, in our groups, positive self-exploration and disclosure, as well as continuing development of personal choice and responsibility for one's feeling and actions in the group. We encouraged members to follow through feelings with open encounter with other members of the group, and we stressed the development of alternative modes of expression and action. We in no way outlawed negative self-disclosures or feelings, but rather we tried to work with such material in the context of how a person might turn such feelings into personal strengths or use them in the process of self-actualization. Interpretation was kept to a minimum, since our rationale is that self-exploration, encounter, feedback, clarification and support provide the setting for growth and development. At any point in time during the group, the individual may make the decision to open up to the group. The activity of self-disclosure is shaped by the expression, itself, and by the responsive feedback from other group members. Another way of looking at the structure of our groups is to take the approach of Ted Landsman and think of the development of "one's best self". "one's best self may be defined as an individual's functioning on the highest levels of his uniquely human characteristics. In addition to intelligence, productivity, and talent actualization, such functioning includes sensitivity, warmth, skill in human relationships, courage, kindness, gentleness, and the capacity to help in conflict resolution or to help in general" (Landsman, 1967).

Now, as to the actual formation of the groups -- three groups of sophomore students were formed, matched in age, marital status, sex and an "interaction

score". The interaction score was the total acceptance score taken from the Hill Interaction Matrix, Form A, and is a measure of the person's overall willingness to participate in interactions with others. One group was to meet for a period of eight weeks, one and a half hours each week -- this was the ongoing group. A second group was to meet for a total period of twelve hours over a weekend -- this was the marathon group. Both groups had a break in the middle of their experience. The ongoing group had spring vacation after four weeks (six hours), and the marathon group went home, overnight, after the first six hours. A third group did not meet at all as a group, but acted as a control group on all research measures. You might be interested in our choice of the twelve hour period, since to many a twelve hour session is more of a "mini-marathon" than a regular marathon which may go twenty four to thirty hours. From previous observations in pilot work, we were making an educated guess that the twelve hour period was just over the lower limit of a marathon, in terms of similar dynamics and interactions which are found in the longer sessions. Thus, we would be into the marathon, but would not be introducing the factor of fatigue which occurs in the longer sessions, but which would not be expected to occur in our matched ongoing group. A further note on the matching of the marathon and ongoing groups--following the ending of the research, the design was explained to the participants. They became most interested in meeting their 'matches' and a 'meet your matches' party was planned. After talking for an hour or so at the party, eight of the nine pairs had recognized their match without being given any information. It is also noteworthy that the two co-leaders, when into the marathon, very quickly realized which members of the marathon were matches for the members of the ongoing group which was already running, although, they, too, were given no information as to who matched whom.

All of our students were volunteers from beginning psychology classes. Each group had nine students and two co-leaders who also acted as participant-catalysts during the group experience. We used the same co-leaders in both groups for purposes of control. Sessions were held under conditions of tape recording and observation through a one-way mirror, with the permission of the members of the groups.

We used whatever techniques seemed appropriate to the groups at a given moment of time. At times, we relied upon verbal interchange; at other times, non-verbal techniques and exercises were involved. However, we felt it was of utmost importance that our group sessions be person centered rather than technique centered or topic centered. Thus, the co-leaders frequently reminded the groups, directly or indirectly, that the group's task was personal exploration and encounter -- not game playing or abstract issue settling.

What did we find? We found both similarities and differences in the onging and marathon groups. Let me start with some of the similarities. Both the ongoing and marathon groups went through similar dynamic phases: First, a phase characterized by anxiety, uncertainty, defenses well up. Secondly, a gradual moving into self-disclosure and tentative personal encounter. Third, a phase of relatively intense personal encounter and free expression of feeling. Fourth, a withdrawal into intellectual defenses (social chitchat or abstract discussion), followed by a return to the intensive, emotional level. Finally, the ending was characterized by strong positive feelings and an awareness of the impending separation, as members would go their separate ways following the group experience. Although the phases were similar, the groups behaved somewhat differently, in that the marathon group proceeded straight through these phases to an intensive, 'peak emotional experience' (Maslow, 1962) in the last few hours. The ongoing group, on the other hand, seemed to have

to repeat the initial phases each week. These phases became shorter and shorter, but they were evident, to some degree, right up to the last group session. Further, the marathon peak experience was considerably more intense than was that of the ongoing group, although both groups expressed feelings of closeness, love and appreciation for each other, along with verbalizing the difficulty of separation.

A few more similarities -- both the ongoing and marathon groups were characterized by repeated attempts of members to relate to one another on an honest, spontaneous basis. Both group situations were departures from the generally accepted social pattern of relating, and members of both groups recognized and described these departures as being 'more satisfying'. Both the ongoing and marathon groups progressed from formality to informality, in expression, in posture and in styles of relating, among members. Both were characterized by self-exploration and self-disclosures which are usually reserved for family or for complete strangers who are likely never to be seen again. Members of both types of group experience expressed positive feelings about the experience and the desire to see each other again, rather than losing contact.

Now let us take a look at some of the differences between the groups. Members of the marathon group liked the length of the sessions and claimed they would not have wanted to meet on a weekly basis. The ongoing group was unanimous in declaring their sessions too short. By their request, this group met in an intensive session for six hours (after the post-testing), and all agreed that they found that session more rewarding than any one of the weekly sessions. The marathon group felt the atmosphere of their sessions was mostly close, personal and intense, relieved from time to time only, by social chatter. The ongoing group described their weekly meeting atmosphere as warm

and understanding, but commented, too, that they sensed a somewhat 'strained' and 'undefined" atmosphere at times. In the marathon group, members were rarely bored with the conversation, and most of the interaction seemed to them to be on a person-to-person basis. In the ongoing group, discussions tended to be more general and members were sometimes bored. The marathon group tended to talk about each member as a person and to talk directly to the person. The ongoing group members felt that the group tended to talk about the 'problem in general" rather than relating it to the person in question. When marathon members reported an inability to relate to one of the other group members, they attributed the difficulty to a clash of personalities. The ongoing group, on the other hand, attributed difficulty to relate to their inability to "get to know that person."

It seems fair to say that, subjectively, the marathon group was felt by members to be the more rewarding experience. Let me say that we are not at all sure of the whys and wherefores of the reported subjective experience. We have only trends to report in this particular data due to small sample size, but we have become quite interested in trying to clarify for ourselves just what it is that is being reflected in the reports of the participants and the co-leaders. Trends in the data from the Hill Interaction Matrix measures suggest that the marathon group moves more quickly than the ongoing group into personal relationship interaction, and furthermore, that the marathon group stays at the level of interaction a high percentage of the total group time. It seems plausible to us that the strongly positive subjective experience of the marathon is directly related to the fact that the marathon experience is primarily personal relationship centered. We might speculate that in a time when much is being said about the so-called "generation gap," when young people complain of feeling alienated from family

and society, that situations which allow personal disclosure and sharing with other human beings may be most important to the young person's subjective sense of well-being.

Another piece of data which appears as a directional difference between the marathon and ongoing groups is that which relates to a hypothesis we had about the relative personality integration of the group experience, as reflected by a measure of increased feeling of internal control over the pattern of one's reinforcements (Rotter's I-E Scale). We discovered that ongoing group members, as a group, became slightly more internalizing--presumably reflecting increased feeling that they were in control of the reinforcements occuring in their living. The marathon group members, as a group, became somewhat Less internalizing--presumably reflecting decreased feeling that their reinforcements were a function of their own personal control. The data of the ongoing group makes sense when we remember the intentional emphasis in the groups for members to increasingly accept their own responsibility for feelings and actions. The data from the marathon group is, however, difficult to understand, and the opposite of what we would predict. On looking more closely, we feel the data may reflect the very close sense of communion and trust which was evident at the close of the marathon experience among marathon group members. The measures were taken shortly after the conclusion of the marathon experience, and in a sense, the members may have still been feeling very much a part of each other. It may be that the sharing part of the experience was uppermost at the time measures were taken, and that in that sense, reinforcement control was perceived as a group dynamic rather than as a personal mastery task. We hope to clarify these results through a follow-up study this year. In any case, these data are only

suggestive of differences between the marathon and ongoing groups, since the change scores are not statistically significant, although they are directionally opposite for the two groups.

We have concluded that we may have been asking many of the wrong questions in our research measures. We found that some of our measures seemed to be tapping in on important issues, while others were completely missing the boat. I might say, without going into the details of the measures involved, that we feel that the problem is one of measuring the individual within the dynamic context of the immediate, interpersonal encounter, and that we are not at all sure that measures which relate to relatively generalized personality characteristics are going to clarify the variables which seem important in the group situation. Instead of asking questions which relate primarily to "more-or-less isolated" self-perception or generalized personality traits, we should, perhaps, be asking such questions as: What, to you, is a close relationship? How possible do you think it is to have one? What do you feel when someone shows you that he wants to be close to you? Do you feel that you are frequently very much alone in your living? What is the impact of that aloneness on you? And, in turn, as post measures -- the same kinds of questions, trying to get at whether or not, after the group experience, the person feels more sure of what he means by a close relationship, less threatened by others, more like a close relationship is possible, less alone in his living, more like he can use periods of aloneness constructively. We plan to build these kinds of questions into our future research.

In conclusion, we continue to be intrigued by the possibilities of the marathon experience. This year we have varied our use of the marathon, sometimes starting a group with a marathon and then continuing over time -- and sometimes ending a group with a marathon after an ongoing experience. We have

had marathons alone, and we have introduced the marathon into the middle of a group experience. At the present time, we are thinking of moving more and more into the marathon experience, perhaps after one or two weekly meetings in order to become acquainted. It is certainly advantageous, in terms of numbers of students served, to use the marathon -- as a new group can be formed each time. We are continuing to innovate and introduce new techniques. Perhaps our strongest feeling at present is that we do need much more experience and research before trying to draw broad generalizations -- in the meantime, we feel that marathons should be treated as any other new psychological phenomenon, with interest, caution and a questioning, but open mind.

## REFERENCES*


1. Bach, George R. The Marathon group: intensive practice of intimate interaction. Psychological Reports, 1966, 18, 995-1005.

2. Bach, George R. Marathon group dynamics: I. Some functions of the professional group facilitator. Psychological Reports, 1967, 20, 995-999.

3. Bach, G.R. Marathon group dynamics: II. Dimensions of Helpfulness. Psychological Reports, 1967, 20, 1147-1158.

4. Bach, G.R. Marathon group dynamics: III. Disjunctive contacts. Psychological Reports, 1967, 20, 1163-1172.

5. Hoover, E. The great group binge. West Magazine, Los Angeles Times, 1967, January 8, 8-13.

6. Hurst, James C. The use of the marathon as a predictive device for success in Counseling practicum, Detroit Convention Abstracts, American Personnel and Guidance Assoc., April 1968.

7. Landsman, Ted, To be or not to be...One's best self, in To be or not to Be....Existential-Psychological Perspectives on the Self, (ed.) Sydney M. Jourard, University of Florida Monographs, Social Sciences No. 34, 1967.

8. Maslow, A.H., Toward a Psychology of Being, Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1962.

9. May, Rollo, the daemonic: love and death, Psychology Today, 1968 Feb. 16-25.

10. Mintz, Elizabeth, Time extended marathon groups. Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice, 1967.

11. Otto, H.A. (ed.) Explorations in Human Potentialities. Springfield, Illinois; Thomas, 1966.

12. Otto, H.A. and Hanson, K.W. The Multiple Strength Perception Method: A Four Year Evaluation. Proceedings of the Utah Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 43: 168-72.

13. Rogers, Carl, A conversation with the father of Rogerian therapy, Psychology Today, 1967, Dec., 19-21, 62-66.

14. Rogers, C.R. The process of the basic encounter group. Mimeographed. Available from Carl R. Rogers, Ph.D., Western Behavioral Sciences Institute, 1121 Torrey Pines Rd., La Jolla, California 92037.

15. Rotter, Julian, 'Generalized Expectations for Internal Versus External Control of Reinforcement', Psychological Monographs, 1966, Vol. 80, No. 1.

16. Sohl, J. The Lemon Eaters. New York: Simon-Schuster, 1967.

17. Stoller, Frederick, The long weekend, Psychology Today, 1967. Dec., 28-33.

18. Stoller, F. H. Marathon group therapy. In G.M. Gazda (ed.), Innovations in Group Therapy. Charles C. Thomas, 1968 (in press).

19. Weigel, Richard G. Marathon Group Counseling and Marathon Group Discussion with a University Client Population, Detroit Convention Abstracts, American Personnel and Guidance Assoc., April, 1968.

20. Hill, William Fawcett Hill Interaction Matrix, Youth Studies Center, University of Southern California, 1965.

*Included are the available references on marathon groups.